

The growing distance

"I always ask myself

How could this darker cloud make me stronger now."

Est

The email landed in my inbox with the quiet efficiency of a bomb.

Subject: Photography Commission – William Jakrapatr Exhibition (Absence & Light)

It was from William's agent. A formal commission, outlining a comprehensive photography package to promote William's upcoming solo exhibition. Key deliverables: artist portraits (new concepts), studio shots, behind-the-scenes, and eventual event coverage for the opening night.

My heart should have leaped. This was the dream gig, the kind Tui had fought for me to get. A long-term project with a major artist, perfectly aligning with my style. It meant stability. It meant growth. It meant... more time with William.

But as I read through the bullet points, a cold, hard knot formed in my stomach.

Solo exhibition: "Absence & Light."

Opening in three months.

Venue: Siam Contemporary Gallery.

He hadn't told me.

He hadn't mentioned a single word about it. Not in our nightly calls, which had become shorter, more strained. Not in our texts, which he now took hours, sometimes half a day, to reply to. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, wanting to type, Is this a joke? Wanting to demand, Why didn't you tell me?

But the professional part of me—the part Tui had painstakingly molded—knew better. This was a job. A big one. And I was Est Supha Sangaworawong, the photographer

I drafted a polite, professional reply, confirming receipt and expressing enthusiasm. I attached my rates, requested a detailed schedule, and promised to follow up with initial concept ideas. My hand didn't tremble once. But inside, I was shaking apart.

The distance had been creeping in slowly, subtly. Like shadows lengthening as the sun sets.

At first, after that first electrifying date, the calls were still long, filled with his quiet observations and my eager questions. We'd talked about the painting he'd done of

flowers—a chaotic, vibrant portrait of Lego's offerings.

He was doing better. He was replying to emails, making calls to his café managers, even talking about a new art, supplier for the flower shop. He was slowly, painstakingly, rebuilding his life. And I'd been there. Cheering him on. Holding his hand. Listening. But as he started to climb out of his shell, he started to pull away from me, too.

His messages, once immediate, became sporadic. Sometimes, they were just emojis in response to my rambling paragraphs. Our calls, once lasting until dawn, now ended with "I'm tired, Est." after twenty minutes.

I'd tried to tell myself it was normal. He was busy. He was healing. He was a deeply introverted, reclusive artist finding his footing in the world again. He needed space.

But the aching in my chest grew heavier with each unanswered text, each shortened call. I kept reaching. I kept asking.

My phone lay cold on my desk. I picked it up, scrolled through our chat. So much one-sided enthusiasm. So much unreciprocated longing.

He didn't tell me about the exhibition. The thought hammered at me, dull and persistent. And I'm finding out through his agent.

It felt like a betrayal. Not a malicious one, but a careless, casual kind. The kind that reminds you where you truly stand.

I thought about Tui's warning.

I thought about Lego's face, small and hurt, retreating from William's apartment.

I thought about how William had said, "I don't want to be alone anymore."

And how I had believed him.

I couldn't concentrate on my own work. My hands kept shaking. The glow of the laptop screen felt too harsh.

I needed Tui.

I grabbed my camera bag and headed to Ink & Ashes, the familiar scent of antiseptic and ink a small comfort in my turmoil. Tui was at his station, his concentration a palpable thing. Hong sat quietly at his own desk, sketching in a large notebook, his silver hair glinting in the soft light. The studio hummed with the steady rhythm of their work. I sat down heavily in the worn leather chair by Tui's station, watching him work.

"Hey." I said, my voice rougher than I intended.

Tui looked up, his eyes immediately assessing my face. The easy smile he usually gave me disappeared. "What's wrong?"

I pushed the email across his desk, the subject line screaming silently. He read it, his brow furrowing deeper with each line. His jaw tightened. He knew exactly what it meant. He knew the dream gig, the big break. And he knew William hadn't told me.

"He didn't tell you?" Tui's voice was low, carefully controlled.

I shook my head, unable to speak.

"Three months? A solo exhibition at Siam Contemporary?" He looked at me, his eyes full of a quiet fury that was both comforting and terrifying. "After all you've been doing for him."

"He's been busy," I mumbled, the excuse tasting like ash. "He's making calls. He's talking to managers. He's healing, Tui."

"Healing doesn't make you forget the person who's been holding your hand while you do it, Est." Tui's voice was sharp, cutting through my self-delusion. "He's getting his life back, and he's shutting you out. That's what's happening."

My eyes pricked with tears. "I don't know what to do."

"You did everything right." Tui said, his voice softer now, reaching out to squeeze my shoulder. "You showed up. You were there. You listened. You gave him space. What more can you do?"

"I don't know." I whispered. "I don't want to lose him."

"Then don't." Tui said. "But don't lose yourself either. Don't make yourself small so he has room to grow."

Hong, who had been listening silently, closed his sketchbook. He walked over, a thermos in his hand. "Hot chocolate." he said softly, handing it to me. "For the heartbreak. Tui taught me."

I took the thermos, my hands trembling. "Thanks."

"It's okay to be angry, Est." Hong said, his voice quiet. "It's okay to feel hurt. You're allowed to have needs, too." He was looking at me with those knowing eyes, the same ones that saw the subtle shifts in Tui.

"I just... I don't understand," I confessed. "We were so good. He kissed me. He said he didn't want to be alone anymore. He showed me that painting of me, Tui. It was... everything."

"It was a moment, Est," Tui said, pulling a damp cloth from a bucket. "A beautiful, important moment. But moments aren't relationships. Relationships are built on consistency. On communication. On showing up for each other, even when things get hard."

He wasn't just talking about William. He was talking about all of us. About Lego. About himself.

"Maybe he's just overwhelmed." I offered, trying to find an excuse for William. "He hasn't left the apartment in three years. He's doing so much."

"He's doing what he needs to do for himself." Tui agreed. "And that's fine. But his actions are having consequences. And you're allowed to feel those consequences."

Hong nodded. "Sometimes, when people start healing, they forget who helped them get there. They get scared of the intimacy they needed to start the process." I took a long swallow of hot chocolate. It was sweet, comforting, but couldn't quite mask the bitter taste in my mouth.

"What do I do?" I asked, looking from Tui to Hong, two people who understood the delicate dance of human connection more than anyone I knew.

"You tell him how you feel." Tui said simply. "You tell him you're hurt. You ask him why he didn't tell you. You give him a chance to explain. And then... you listen. And you decide if that's enough for you."

"But what if he pulls away even more?"

"Then you have your answer, Est." Hong said softly. "And you know where you stand. And that's better than living in uncertainty." I stared at the steam rising from the hot chocolate.

The idea of confronting William, of expressing my hurt, felt like tearing open a fresh wound. He was so fragile. So easily overwhelmed. What if it shattered the fragile thing we had?

But what if I didn't? What if I just let this distance grow until it became a chasm? What if I kept making excuses for him, kept shrinking myself until I disappeared completely from his life? That felt like a far greater risk.

I closed my eyes.

"Does it hurt to lie?"

The question, ancient and childish, floated into my mind. I didn't know who asked it. Maybe myself. Maybe William.

No. It didn't hurt to lie. It hurt to be lied to. It hurt to be an afterthought. It hurt to

love someone who couldn't quite see you, even after promising to.

I opened my eyes, looking at Tui and Hong, two constants in a world of variables.

"I need to talk to him," I said, my voice firm. "Properly."

Tui nodded. "We'll be here. Waiting. With more hot chocolate."

Hong gave me a small, encouraging smile.

I stood up, the chair scraping loudly. My camera bag felt light today, stripped of its hope.

"You're going to be okay, Est." Tui said, his voice warm.

I nodded. I hoped so.

I hoped William was going to be okay too.

I realized that my well-being couldn't be conditional on his. My light couldn't depend on whether he chose to acknowledge it. Because if I was going to capture anyone's story, I had to be strong enough to tell my own. And sometimes, telling your story meant demanding to be heard, even if it meant risking the very thing you loved. I walked out of Ink & Ashes, the bell chiming behind me. The city felt different now. Less sharp. More challenging. But I was still here. And I was finally ready to fight for what I needed.